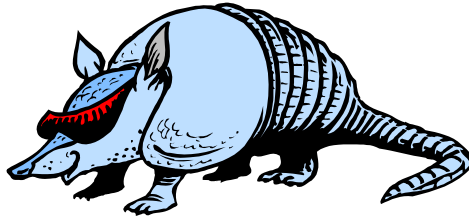


# Living With Armadillos



Although armadillos have several unique characteristics that distinguish them from other mammals, the more than 2,000 bony scales that cover the head, legs, and back are their most notable features. The Spanish word *armadillo* means "little armored one." The "armor" of the armadillo is composed of bony plates covered by a leathery skin. While this hard shell offers some protection, it cannot really repel predator attacks. However, it may provide protection when the armadillo coils himself in his burrow and a predator cannot get enough of a grasp to do any damage.

Armadillos range throughout the south-central and southeastern United States and may now be found as far north as Oklahoma and Arkansas. This range expansion has been aided somewhat by humans, who have transported armadillos to other parts of the country.

Originally native to South America, armadillo colonization in the U.S. seems to have taken place only within the last 150 years. The armadillo found in the U.S. is called the nine-banded armadillo (*Dasypus novemcinctus*) because of the nine bands that run across the armor plating on the back, which allow for flexing. However, unlike some of his relatives, the nine-banded armadillo can't roll up into a ball. His defense from predators is to either dig or enter an existing burrow, or to press his unprotected belly against the ground with his legs tucked under his shields. The nine-banded is the only armadillo who can swim, though, and—it's not a myth—these armadillos may even hold their breath and walk along the bottom when crossing streams.

Armadillos live in a variety of habitats, including thorn scrub, mixed grasslands, and wooded bottomlands. Their preferred habitat may be wetlands with dense shade and sandy soils that are easy to dig. River valleys and areas around creeks, stock ponds, and reservoirs are choice armadillo habitats. Usually nocturnal, armadillos dig numerous emergency and temporary burrows. These may range in depth from 20 inches to 20 feet. More permanent abodes may include a network of tunnels with three to four entrances.

The armadillo's diet consists mostly of insects and other invertebrates. Small animals, baby birds, eggs, and carrion may occasionally be eaten as well. Armadillos are almost constantly active when foraging—poking and probing into crevices and under litter for food. They continuously grunt while foraging and appear not to be particularly attentive to their surroundings. In fact, if you hold still it may be possible to have a foraging armadillo actually bump into you.

The armadillo mating season occurs during July and August, but implantation is delayed several months until about November. The normal litter size is four, all of the same sex and all genetically identical because the offspring are derived from a single egg. Armadillo kits are born fully developed, but it takes several weeks for the pink leathery skin to harden into its lifelong protective covering.

## Problems and Solutions

Two types of problems generally occur with armadillos. While feeding, they may root around in a garden or landscaped area and disturb plantings. The second type of conflict occurs in the digging of semipermanent tunnel networks. The disturbance of gardens is generally temporary—the armadillo may simply move on after getting his fill. In some cases, armadillos may even be providing a valuable service by feeding on destructive insects. Armadillos are one of the few animals who will take on fire ants and can be highly beneficial when these insects are present.

The damaging effects of tunneling and burrowing are also usually localized and may be addressed by a combination of habitat modification, exclusion, and elimination of cover. Removing brush or weed cover can encourage armadillos to move elsewhere, as can restricting access to sources of water. Fencing can be used to successfully exclude armadillos from gardens, small yards, or water sources. They are able climbers and skilled diggers however, so any type of fencing must take these attributes into account. Bury the fence a foot or more down to deter tunneling, and prevent "climb-overs" by including a rigid overhang that extends outward for a foot or more at about a 45° angle. Alternatively, semi-rigid plastic fencing—of the sort used at construction sites—can also work with armadillos, since they do not like to climb an unstable fence.

